Elinor Goldschmied (1910–2009)

Accessed on: 22 Nov 2023

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Elinor Goldschmied (1910–2009)

Let the past inform the present!

Jacqui Cousins

Elinor Goldschmied is a lesser known Froebelian pioneer in the world of childcare and early education whose principles and practice with babies and young children have great relevance today. This chapter presents biographical detail of Elinor Goldschmied and her work. It draws on material from films made or directed by Elinor in Italy from 1952 and in Britain, Spain and America where she continued making films from 1986 to 1993. Before she died in 2009, Elinor bequeathed all her films to be used by early years students, families, educators and scholars as part of the Froebel Archive collection. Quotations in italics are included in this chapter from her British Library interviews of 1990 and 2001 about her life, her principles and practice, films and publications. These interviews are in the British Library: Distinguished Women collection.

The Elinor Goldschmied Froebel Archive project (2009–2011)

This project was funded by the Froebel Trust. Advisory meetings with Tina Bruce, Sonia Jackson and Peter Elfer were held regularly and communication by email was frequent. The Project team were Jacqui Cousins as coordinator and Michela Delamere to help translate the Italian films; Anita Hughes and Dorothy Selleck to transcribe films made in Britain; and Kornelia Cepok (senior archivist, University of Roehampton) to assist with cataloguing the archive. The Project team prepared and assisted in the current film making with a booklet for Froebel training purposes.

In her films (located in the Froebel Archive, Roehampton University) Elinor Goldschmied guides students and puts into practice her firmly held beliefs about holistic development, emotional well-being and the learning of young children from the beginning of their lives. It is those same beliefs and ways of working with babies, young children and adults alike which link well with Froebelian principles and practice.

Five early childhood principles

- Babies are born as people; childhood is seen as valid in itself, as part of life not simply as preparation for adulthood
- The family (or prime carer) is the first educator of all children irrespective of social class
The whole child is important in terms of healthy holistic development i.e. social, physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual and creative development
• ‘Play’ is vital to enable healthy holistic development; learning cannot be compartmentalised
• Early relationships with interplay between infants from babyhood with interactions between them and adults are of central importance in their communication and learning

The Froebel team’s professional links with Elinor

From 1980 onwards Elinor worked with or had guided each of her professional colleagues. Though each of us came from different disciplines, we had all been encouraged by Elinor to observe babies and young children as they explored and played in environments so meaningful to them that they became contented, curious and highly motivated talkers and learners. I had known Elinor since my childhood but last saw her just before I left for Australia in 1958. In 1986 I began a professional relationship with her when we met at a conference in Islington, London. She was showing her first video training resource Infants at Work: Curiosity and Learning – Creating Early Play Experience for Babies. This was my introduction to her Treasure Baskets (see Chapters 23 and 26) which added another dimension to my diagnostic work with babies and infants. Before focusing on what Elinor called her professional minute particulars, expressed particularly in the role of Treasure Baskets (Cousins, 1997, 1999; Cousins, Hughes and Selleck, 2013; Grenier, 2009; Hughes and Cousins, 2017) and the Key Person approach, here is a summary of her life.

The life and work of Elinor Goldschmied (1910–2009)

Elinor Goldschmied (née Sinnott), the fourth of seven children, was born into a prosperous professional English family in rural Gloucestershire. She emphasised how we should never deny our childhood experiences either for our own lifelong development or on our professional thinking about young children. With that in mind, her films show her imaginative and innovative practice which she said . . . sprang from my insatiable curiosity, love of stories, playing and being free to spend as much time as I chose in the garden.

However, as a child, Elinor also suffered great sadness after the traumatic death of a favourite brother aged 8. Shortly after, she lost her mother who died of cancer after a long illness. Elinor said it was personal experiences of that nature which led her to see how closely connected are the emotional and thinking strands of learning and how important are those people who guide the development of infants and support their emotions. This led to her later study of early attachment and separation with the attachment theorist, John Bowlby.

Becoming a teacher

After her mother died, her engineer father left again to serve in the First World War. Elinor was sent to live with her grandfather in Bristol. There she attended the Clifton High School until age 17. When she left school, there were only four employment roles a girl was able to do apart from to marry. These were domestic science, nursing, secretarial work or teaching. Even though drawn more to an artistic career, her sisters had already become nurses or secretaries so in 1928, Elinor decided (somewhat reluctantly) on teaching. She visited many colleges and chose to train for three years at the Froebel Educational Institute (FEI) Roehampton. Initially, this may have been because the gardens and setting were so beautiful. She soon discovered the staff shared so
much of her own thinking. In nursery and school practice they showed their respect for babies and young children. In conversations and British library interviews, she said:

I had the good fortune to go to the best training college at that time . . . there were contacts with outstanding people and their practices in early childhood like Margaret McMillan and Susan Isaacs – I spent time at the Malting House School in Cambridge where the young were given time to be curious and adventurous in play and to make sense or learn in ways which were natural to them . . . but I was always aware of my own ‘upper-class’ intellectual and social advantages. I was drawn to people near Kings Cross who worked with the poor and educationally disadvantaged. I met women in Bloomsbury who were Quakers or part of the Mary Ward Settlement movement whose prime aim was to teach those in the nearby overcrowded slums to read, write and become numerate. Most of the teachers were retired volunteers and unqualified but soon those with Froebel teacher training were employed. The nearby Coram’s Fields gave the children safe spaces to play, to paint, dance, watch ballets or go to their ‘Penny Concerts’ to listen to outstanding musicians.

**Links with Froebelian principles and practice**

Elinor said the philosophy of Froebel and those other early childhood pioneers closely matched her own beliefs about early childhood development. She talked about the crucial importance of a happy babyhood with young children being given time and freedom to explore and play with others. At the Froebel Educational Institute, *childhood was recognised as a state in its own right and not as a preparation for adulthood*. Child observation was a key element in her training and later work.

Her tutor saw she was very creative and had difficulties with teaching in a conventional primary school. She suggested she go to see Bill Curry, then Head of the progressive school, Dartington Hall. Still uneasy with teaching, Elinor became a housemother there for five years. 1930s Dartington provided Elinor with a very exciting, artistic, cultural and political environment. It was a magnet for some of the most creative people in Europe and many intellectuals who were refugees from Nazi persecution. It was here that Elinor became more interested in social justice and politics and in bringing about change in children’s lives. She became involved for the first time in making films and hoped to take that further because she recognised that *films and books are powerful tools for change*!

In 1937 Elinor won a scholarship to study on the Mental Health course at the London School of Economics. She qualified as a psychiatric social worker. There Elinor met her future husband, a lawyer, Guido Goldschmied, who had been driven from his home in Trieste by the Fascist regime. During the Second World War, Elinor went to Bradford to take charge of a home for very disturbed children . . . who were un-billetable because they were so wild . . . many were Jewish refugees who had been transported without their families . . . some were orphans . . . can you imagine what that must have been like for them? Elinor created **order** for those children by giving them each a **special person** who became close to them and cared for them in small groups and allowed them to play in their own space. Limited resources did not matter to Elinor because there were natural materials and a big garden with plenty of adults to help her healthily love and support those troubled children.

In a few weeks she observed how quickly the situation was transformed and how much the children changed . . . *they started to behave like normal children!* Elinor said her **Key Person Approach** (see Chapters 23 and 26) began here together with her management and reorganisation of day
nurseries in Britain and Italy. In the 1950s she had gone there with Guido and their baby Marco, but sadly Guido died in 1951, so she moved with Marco to her sister in Milan where in 1952 she took charge of a nursery. Elinor was very shocked at the practices she discovered at the nursery and it led her to make her first Italian film, translated as ‘at least let me play’ and ‘the right of childhood for every child’ (No. 13 in Froebel Archive) which showed . . . babies rocking, glass eyed; they were frozen children with no personal relationships and no play activity . . . illegitimate children in institutions cared for by nuns . . . the nuns worked all hours and their own personal and emotional needs were not taken into account. The rule of the order was that if you made a relationship, you were out . . . moved on . . . the children suffered . . . what did I do? . . . I transformed it . . . we divided it into small groups, personalised the care and offered good quality play activity . . . my Treasure Baskets began here . . .

In 1955, Elinor returned to Britain to study attachment and separation at the Tavistock Institute, London with John Bowlby. She became a senior psychiatric social worker and London County Council inspector. At least three times every year Elinor continued to work in Italy as a specialist in early years care and education. She recognised that differences in the culture and funding would influence daily routines but was saddened in her last years to hear nursery practitioners in Britain often say they were afraid to cuddle crying children lest they be falsely accused of child abuse. She spoke of feeling very impatient when watching practitioners take shortcuts when working with babies or complained that they no longer have enough time . . . a lack of time must never be used as an excuse for not carrying out the best possible childcare practice with babies and infants . . . In common with Froebelian beliefs, she also regarded the family as the most significant first educator of children and saw women as capable of much more than motherhood.

Romanian orphans 1989 – Treasure Baskets and heuristic play

1989 was chaotic for abandoned babies, infants and orphans in institutions in Romania. After the revolution they had been found 10 to a cot; wrapped in dirty rags; living in squalor without close contact with a nurse or any opportunity to move or play. Through international relief agencies, 10 infants at a time were flown (with a young carer each) for paediatric diagnostic and assessment in Gottingen, Northern Germany. As I was already there on an inter-agency lecture tour to introduce the work of Elinor Goldschmied, I joined a team of specialists to help diagnose any identifiable problems of babies and infants and advise on economical, empowering and effective intervention.

We tested in practice (Grenier, 2009) whether the Treasure Baskets and heuristic play approaches could be effective as diagnostic tools. Next we worked collaboratively with families, carers and professional colleagues from all other disciplines using participant observation methods which are not intrusive or distracting. I encouraged professional discussions about how we would share observations of the babies and offered extended training sessions on the design and use of Treasure Baskets and heuristic play with families and all other carers. Individual medical and neurological procedures had a priority but I was free to work in any way I chose to observe the babies and young children with their untrained and very young carers while simultaneously supporting and guiding them.

With the nurses we had created a safe, comfortable and peaceful sensory environment in which (for the first time in their lives) the babies could be looked after by their own ‘key person’ – taken out of their cots, comforted, bathed and massaged. This was all new for their carers who had previously had to manage the natural demands of many babies. They had never been allowed to become too emotionally close even while bottle feeding. It was very moving to watch as the babies were held tenderly by them to be fed and afterwards have sores creamed and softer nappies changed. In their individual cots for the first time, the babies were free to move
but some were very stiff and afraid. We watched as they gained confidence to reach out, touch or smile to communicate with us and each other.

With their interpreter, before our observations, I showed the children’s key persons and local nurses Elinor’s video Infants at Work which she had given to me. Afterwards we shared my Treasure Basket filled with natural sensory materials and interesting everyday objects (Hughes, 1989). They collected more and added them to the basket. I made it clear why the peaceful space and their quiet observation of babies with consistent eye contact can shed light on their holistic development, their curiosity and personalities. Later, I extended the use of the Treasure Baskets to slightly older children’s heuristic play with movement and clay play with free exploration in the garden. Our time with each group was limited to only 10 days.

In each activity, I asked the key persons to focus on their child rather than on any observation schedules. To help them I wrote the following framework as an aide memoire on a flip chart and gave them post-it notes for discussions and questions with the group later. At first they were very unsure but soon at our team meetings they began to relax — their comments and questions flowed.

Holistic child studies: observations within a framework

We made coloured ribbon badges to identify each child, key person and nurse.

- Chosen child – ribbon colour; any name given? Estimated age? Any official details?
- Brief description of your first impression of this child?
- Observed by whom and where? Different contexts tried? For how long?
- Eye contact or movement – looking at hands/ toes/stretching/ touching/ social contact?
- BEST context observed? Child choices? Focus? Concentration? Switched on or off?
- Any emotional responses? Smiling, babbling, crying, comfort-touching, holding or rocking?
- Any key questions or comments? Have any other adults observed this same child?
- Anything we can learn from your observation of this child? E.g. favourite things? Fear?
- Any essential resources to provide to continue child’s positive development.

Outcomes of observations shared with Elinor Goldschmied

On my return to England, I stayed with Elinor to reflect on my experiences, findings and feelings. Elinor was pleased that it had been agreed unanimously by the team that Treasure Baskets and heuristic play as well as all other kinds of play provided appropriate, unthreatening and happy ways for babies and older infants to be observed and for their key persons to enjoy the process. It had not been known initially whether the babies had been suffering de-hydration or malnourishment or had been swaddled too tightly for too long. Brain scans showed some had been born with mental or neurological problems but most had suffered emotional deprivation through neglect or a lack of love. Sadly, so had their young carers, a majority of whom had been institutionalised orphans. Their tears were pitiful when they were told by the doctors that a majority of the older infants were HIV positive. Their colds had been routinely treated by them traditionally by injection . . . all using the same needles. They had had no training and knew nothing about AIDS.

Elinor and I also discussed human resilience and the speed of observable changes made by the infants and carers. We both questioned emotional resilience and spoke about things hidden or too deeply painful to face. Elinor shared again her first Italian film made in 1952. She saw my distress but reassured me that my ongoing support and training of people who work with
traumatised children in war zones abroad or in peaceful Britain would benefit from this first-hand experience.

**Ways forward – shaping the future**

Sponsored by the charity *Save the Children* (Harley and Jebb, 1947), Manchester Metropolitan University organised an International conference in 1994 on early childhood. They asked me to contribute a practically based workshop, ‘Empowerment and Autonomy from Babyhood’ because their audience would include families, other professionals and volunteers from all agencies as well as overseas Government representatives. The first person who rushed into my workshop and swept me off my feet was one of the young Romanian carers first met in Gottingen. There were others in the group who brought my workshop to life when they spoke passionately about the importance of love and told delegates about their experiences – described by them as *empowerment and autonomy in action!* In work of this nature it is rare to gain evaluations or evidence of long term effects. This time, I could see and hear for myself how those young women had blossomed in every possible way. The power of Froebel’s understanding of the profound importance of a relational approach to learning is evident here so strongly in relation to babies as well as adults.

I was also able to ask *what happened to our babies?* I was reassured that a majority were thriving despite some having serious developmental delays. Their young carers had remained their *key persons* when they got back to Romania but later were sent to different places. Some infants had been adopted. Those confident young women had all trained as nurses and were members of their Government’s Childcare Committees with responsibility for the changes in their country’s policies and practice for young orphans. They each used *Treasure Baskets* and *heuristic play* and whenever possible encouraged play and exploration in gardens.

Other volunteers from British charities, including nurses from *Save the Children* and *Christian Aid*, worked for a decade in Romania. They helped to reorganise their old institutional orphanages and replaced them with small family homes where a *housemother* was *key person* for small groups. The innovative practice of Elinor Goldschmied, who began as housemother at Dartington and continued in Bradford, London, Italy, Spain and America, had once again challenged the *status quo* and shaped the future for many distressed children.

**Acknowledgements**

None of this diagnostic ‘pilot study’ could have taken place without the openness of the neurologists and psychiatrists (and their wonderful nurses) in Gottingen. Many who assisted were retired volunteers or came from the Max Planck Institute. We relied continually on the skills of our interpreter, who was a Romanian student of languages. My thanks to them all for such compassion.